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ABSTRACT

The comprehension of written stories starts with learning to comprehend everyday situations, but it is the child's direct experiences with written stories that bring the process to fruition. These direct experiences with stories are generally of two types. Initially there is a storybook time, the occasions upon which a literate person, usually the mother, and the child engage in an act of communication with a book as the focus of the interaction. As the child becomes familiar with reading books through story time, the child experiences written story in another way--the independent reenactments of familiar books. The general description of the means by which storybook time helps the child learn to comprehend written stories is L. S. Vygotsky's notion of development from interpsychological functioning (the parent and the child jointly construct the story) to intrapsychological functioning (the child is able to construct, or comprehend, the story individually). Classrooms should be places where children experience stories. To ensure that children begin very early on to learn to comprehend written language, the teacher can offer the children story experiences through group storybook readings, lap reading, repeated readings, and opportunities for independent reenactments. Included are a three-page bibliography and five transcripts of mother-child interactions during the reading of five stories. (HOD)

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Learning to Comprehend Written Language

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Children have many cognitive puzzles to solve during their first few years of life. Happily, the children's internal human conditions (e.g., human perceptual and neurological functioning, the anatomy of the human body), characteristics of the physical environment (e.g., the world consists of three-dimensional objects that have weight and fall to the ground when dropped), and conditions created by the fact that humans do interact with each other, combine to enable children to solve many of these puzzles (e.g., temporal representation, categorization) naturally, on their own (Feldman, 1980).

See Figure 1

These individually solved puzzles are what developmental psychologists call universals in cognitive development. Basically, all children in all cultures, circumstances, and physical locations in the world solve such puzzles; these learnings are common to all members of the human family. The achievement of universals occurs spontaneously (Piaget, 1952, 1983). In other words, no <u>special</u> environment is required to guarantee that an individual will achieve cognitive universals (Feldman, 1980, p.6).

Literacy, however, is not a universal of human life. We all know that there are societies that have no written language and that, even in a literate society such as ours, some individuals who have had ample time to learn to read and write are, for all intents and purposes, illiterate.

Thus, literacy is not something learned in exactly the same way that conservation or temporal representation are.

How, then, do children become literate? By what means is it that most of them, by the time they are seven or eight years old, have to a significant degree, figured out the puzzle that is comprehending written language? Recent investigations of young children's literacy experiences have given us tremendous insight into the answers to these and related questions. In the time remaining today I should like to examine one aspect of this broad topic -- how children learn to comprehend written stories.

Let me point out that I intend my remarks to stay on a "pre-disciplinary" level (Britton, 1984) today. That is to say, I am essertially concerned with the issue of real children comprehending real stories in the real world of the classroom. So, even though we could, from a research or disciplinary perspective, profitably discuss the terms story and comprehension deeply, I am simply going to use story and comprehension in the generic or garden-variety sense.

For our purposes story is one type of narrative, a narrative with literary intentions, a verbal object made from words in which both the reader and the writer adopt the role of spectator (Britton, 1984). [See Figure 2.]

Insert Figure 2 Here

A story can be described structurally as consisting of one episode or several episodes joined in temporally and/or causally related sequences. In a story the protagonist(s) go through a series of goal-directed events which are aimed at resolving the major problem(s) the protagonist(s) faces. All of this, of course, takes place within the setting(s). Story also entails aesthetics and affect.

I do not want to go as far as Brewer and his colleagues have, designating story as the type of narrative that has entertainment as its primary purpose, and classifying these 'works of entertainment' separately from fables or works of "serious literature" (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1982; Jose & Brewer, 1983) for this would remove a Moby Dick or Great Expectations from the list of stories. I would agree with Brewer, however, when he argues that we must be aware of the relations between (1) processes used to comprehend the real world (plan schema, event schema) and (2) comprehending the story. The appearance of characters in stories, the characters' actions and motives, the settings-- all of these aspects almost always relate closely to the comings and goings of everyday life (even though settings may be fantastic or characters anthropomorphized or able to perform actions which are impossible as we know it in the real world). Thus the goals, the actions, the characters and other aspects in stories are consonant with real life. In other words, there is a kind of continuum between comprehending the event structures of the real world

and comprehending the written story. As Barbara Hardy (1977) has put it, the "primary act of mind" used to comprehend life, narrative, is transferred to art in the story. The narrative of life and the narrative of the story are not the same, of course; nevertheless, there are important similarities between them.

In opting for a broad definition of comprehension, I take the position that comprehending written stories not only entails understanding who did what to whom and why but also involves elements of what is generally referred to as 'response to literature' [or, as Arthur Applebee put it recently in Research in the Teaching of English "literary understanding" (Applebee, 1984)]. As I suggested above, there are aesthetic and affective aspects to story; I believe that comprehending a story involves understanding these as much as understanding its structure through the use of story schema. Thus, there are literary/affective and structural aspect of comprehending stories, and both draw to degrees upon comprehending the real world.

I should like to suggest that the whole process of learning to comprehend written stories begins for most individuals in our society during early childhood. As the discussion above implies, the comprehension of written stories starts with learning to comprehend everyday situations, but it is

the child's direct experiences with written stories that brings the process to fruition. These direct experiences with stories are generally of two types. Initially there is 'storybook time,' the occasions upon which a literate person, usually the mother, and the child engage in an act of communication with a book as the focus of the interaction. As the child becomes familiar with reading books through story time, we find another way in which the child experiences written story -- the independent reenactments of familiar books.

Both of these types of experiences are beneficial to learning to comprehend written language. It has for years been shown that parent-child storybook reading is correlated with literacy learning in particular and school achievement in general (see Teale, 1984 for a review); recently naturalistic studies of storybook time interactions have helped us to understand better why and how it is important (DeLoache, 1984; Snow & Goldfield, 1983; Taylor, in press; Harkness & Miller, 1982).

Through the work of Holdaway (1979), Sulzby (1983, in press), and Doake (1981) we have also come to realize the role which independent reenactments -- the times a child 'reads' a familiar book to himself or another (parent, doll, or pet, for example) -- play in the process. In independent reenactments the child is not only polishing and refining what was learned through social interaction (i.e.,"practicing") but is also

creating new knowledge about books and reading (i.e., learning through accomodation).

Thus, through two primary avenues -- participation in storybook time and independently reenacting storybooks -- the child comes to learn how to comprehend story. In the time remaining today I would like to concentrate on an examination storybook reading episodes only. I shall use data from a study of young children's storybook reading that Elizabeth Sulzby and I are conducting (Sulzby & Teale, 1983). One aspect of that study is an examination of social interactional and language factors in parent-child storybook events. The examples will help to illustrate how such events function to help the child learn how to comprehend written stories.

Briefly, my argument will be this: the general description of the means by which storybook time helps the child learn to comprehend written stories is Vygotsky's (1978) notion of development from interpsychological functioning (the parent and the child jointly construct the story) to intrapsychological functioning (the child is able to construct, or comprehend, the story individually).

Children almost never encounter simply the text in a storybook reading situation. Instead the text is mediated by the adult, who is responding to the child. Thus, in order to understand the process of learning to comprehend story, we must understand the the operation of language and social

interactional factors that accompany the text itself in storybook time. When we examine storybook episodes, we can see that the basis for the child's learning how to comprehend stories is created in the joint interaction between adult and child. In a way, storybook time acts as a demonstration (Smith, 1981a, 1981b) of the story comprehension process. Learning to comprehend written stories, then, is a social/cultural process, begun in social interaction and brought to fruition by the child himself. As Richard Howard has pointed out in his introduction to Roland Barthes' S/Z, when it comes to the ways in which we comprehend written stories, "what we assumed...was nature is in fact culture.... "(Howard, 1974, p. x in Barthes, 1974). We learn how to comprehend written stories as a result of our participation in the sociocultural event of reading stories.

As a first step in examining how this occurs, let us look more closely at my broad definition of comprehending a written story to see what is involved:

Story Comprehension

+ Background Knowledge/Event Schemata
+ Conventions of Story
+ Plot/Characterization/Setting
+ Theme
+ Affective Aspects
+ Aesthetic Aspects

One aspect of comprehension is background knowledge. As the research of the past decade has shown, background knowledge is a key factor in comprehension. Notice how three-year-old Patrick and his mother create this as an aspect of their reading of Bozo and the Hide 'n' Seek Elephant (the words of the text appear in italic):

Insert Transcript 1 and Story Page Here

In this case the mother actually helps Patrick bring knowledge he already "has" to bear on comprehending the actions and purposes of the characters in the story at hand. In other instances new background knowledge may actually be built in the interaction.

Heath (1982) and Cochran-Smith (1984) have call interactions like these "Life-to-Text Interactions." Such interactions result in the child's using knowledge of the world to build bridges between comprehending the real world and comprehending the written story. Real world knowledge can profitably be applied to several of the aspects we have listed above. For example, comprehension of characters, plot, and setting are all enhanced by building or recalling relevant background knowledge. It is important to emphasize, however, that these interactions -- and the ones we shall discuss below -- are not adult-controlled or examples of a stimulus-response account of how children learn to comprehend. Rather, the

interactions are jointly constructed by parent and child.

Let us examine at some other ways in which children can learn through social interaction with the adult a great deal about the process of comprehending written stories. At a very basic level we see how 22 month old Hannah and her mother focus on the characters (and other things) in Cinderella:

Insert Transcript 2 and Story Page Here

Yes, the text gets read; but notice all the other accompanying language and social interaction that aids the child in processing the story. In this instance a great deal of time is spent simply with identifying characters and objects in the story (pointing to the chicken, "Where's the coach?", "Who's this?", and so forth). Understanding who did what to whom in a story depends upon basic identification of the characters involved.

Let us return to Patrick and his mother again, this time reading Arthur's Eyes. This tape was made 3 months after the previous one:

Insert Transcript 3 and Story Page Here

In this excerpt the episode of the story is presented in two forms: once in the words of the text and again in the mother's words. The mother makes explicit certain inferences contained in the text, explaining why Arthur did what he did and leading Patrick to an understanding of the consequences.

The Life-to-Text notion is in evidence here. Such interaction is an aid to the child in learning how to comprehend the episode.

The storybook readings are also typically loaded with affective overtones. Hannah is just two years old at this point. Listen to part of the reading of the Golden Book version of The Three Little Pigs:

Insert Transcript 4 and Story Page Here

Thus, mediation of the text occurs in affective as well as cognitive areas and helps the child understand response to story as well as story structure and content.

We could examine many additional examples and interactions which illustrate other aspects of story that are mediated in storybook time. But the preceding ones should serve to illustrate that the storybook event (not merely the text) serves as the raw material for the child to use in building an understanding of how to comprehend the written story. As I said before, the event is an interpsychological one, constructed jointly in interaction between the adult and child. As we examine storybook readings over time, we can see the move toward intrapsychological functioning. Notice how Hannah and her mother's reading of Cinderella has changed in the five months since our example in Transcript 2.

Insert Transcript 5 and Story Page Here

The emphasis on identifying characters that was so prevalent in the last transcript of the reading of Cinderella has now virtually disappeared. Instead there is more attention in the conversation surrounding the reading to where certain of the characters are and even what they are doing. In a sense, the ante has been raised. Hannah knows the characters; now the focus is much more on issues of 'plot.'

In this manner the process of learning how to comprehend written stories grows out of social interaction. It is not something the child learns in the way that she learns temporal representation. Nor is it learned in the way that the multiplication tables are learned -- through conscious, deliberate drill and practice on the part of the individual child. Thus, learning to comprehend written stories is not a case of someone teaching the child as we traditionally think of teaching. Nor is it a case of the child's independent construction of knowledge. Rather it is an instance of a process for which the English language has no word. The Soviet psychologists call it obuchenie. Roughly, that translates to teaching-learning, the two processes as sides of the same coin.

Implications for the classroom. The notions that a major factor in children's learning to comprehend written stories is their interaction with adults in storybook time has significant implications for classroom practice. First, it implies that we must create opportunities, especially during the kinder-

garten and first grade years, for children to participate in many and varied jointly constructed storybook reading experiences. In other words, story as social interaction should be a planned and frequent part of the child's time in school.

But isn't this simply the old adage of 'read to your students' everyday? Yes and no. You may have noticed that none of the previous examples were teacher reading to class. Rather, they were the more intimate situations, one-to-one or in other examples from our data, one-to-two or three. A process of mediation of story and joint construction of meaning also occurs when a teacher reads to her twenty-odd children (Cochran-Smith, 1984). But research such as that which Roser & Martinez (1984) are conducting, also indicates that there are important differences in language and social interaction and in children's responses in the group versus the one-to-one storybook experience.

Furthermore, teachers read to their students in qualitatively different ways (Dunning & Mason, 1984), and some storybook times are not as rich as others in the facets we have been examining. The one-to-one book readings, or lap readings, seem especially important for children who come to school with little experience in being read to. Parent volunteers or older elementary students could be used to help provide such interactions for kindergarten or first grade children.

Repeated readings of storybooks are also important and

should likewise be a planned aspect of the curriculum. By reading selected books two, five or even more times the teacher (or the lap reader) actually provides the children with varied experiences of the same text because the language and social interaction that surround the text change across the various readings. These repeated readings, then, give the children opportunities for working on different aspects of the story. Thus, in addition to using storybook time as a means of having children encounter a wide variety of literature, the teacher should also organize to provide repeated experiences with certain stories. Each type of experience helps children to develop their comprehension of written language.

Though the topic of children's independent reenactments of storybooks was not dealt with extensively in this paper, it deserves mention in this section on classroom implications. With individual and group storybook experience and repeated readings the teacher will no doubt see the children move from inter- to intrapsychological functioning with particular books. Providing time for children's independent explorations of books will encourage this type of activity. As child "read" books to themselves, each other, the teacher, or even the class stuffed animal, they are gaining valuable practice in refining what was learned through the social interaction of storybook reading episodes with adults and older children, and they also discover new knowledge about books and stories.

Classrooms should be places where children experience

stories. In addition to group storybook readings, lap reading, repeated readings, and opportunities for independent reenactments are but three ways in which we can increase that experience. With these and other methods we can help to ensure that children begin very early on to learn to comprehend written language.

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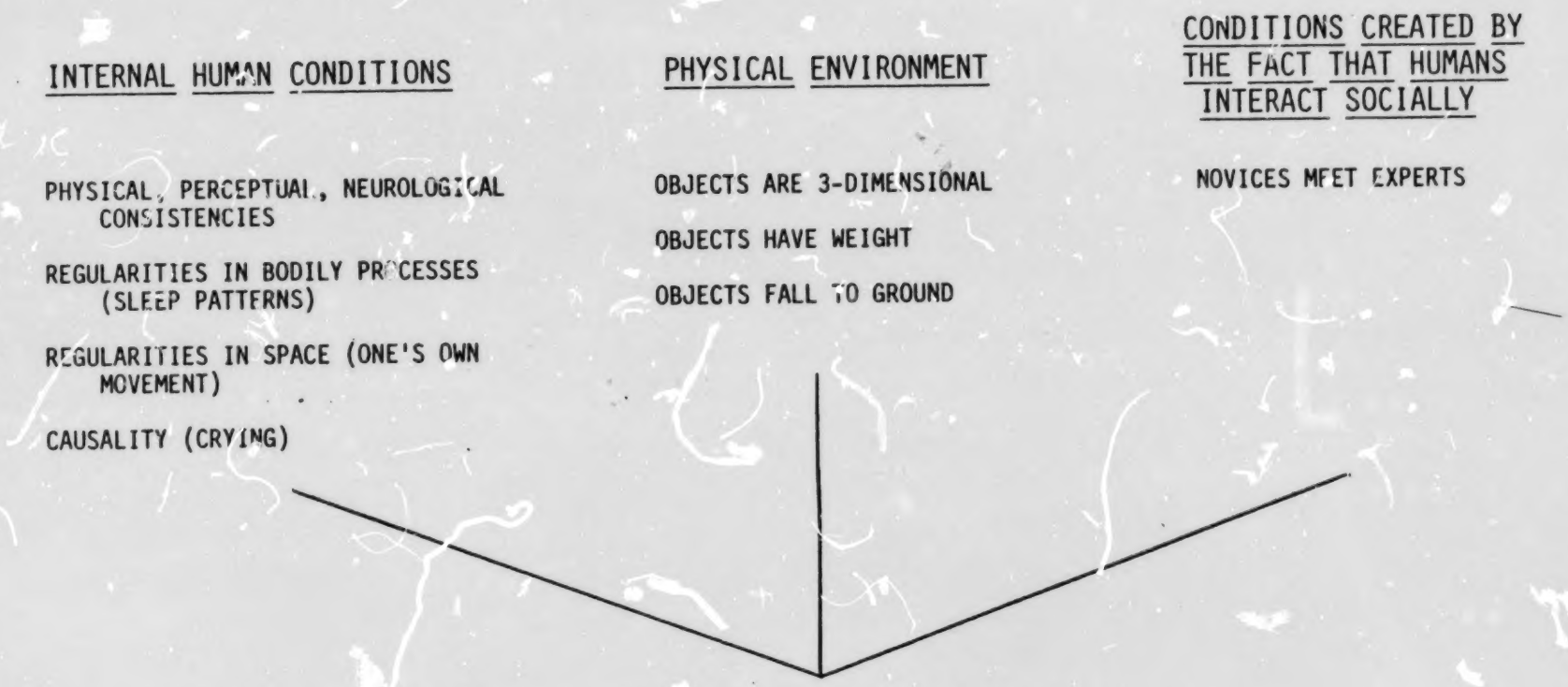
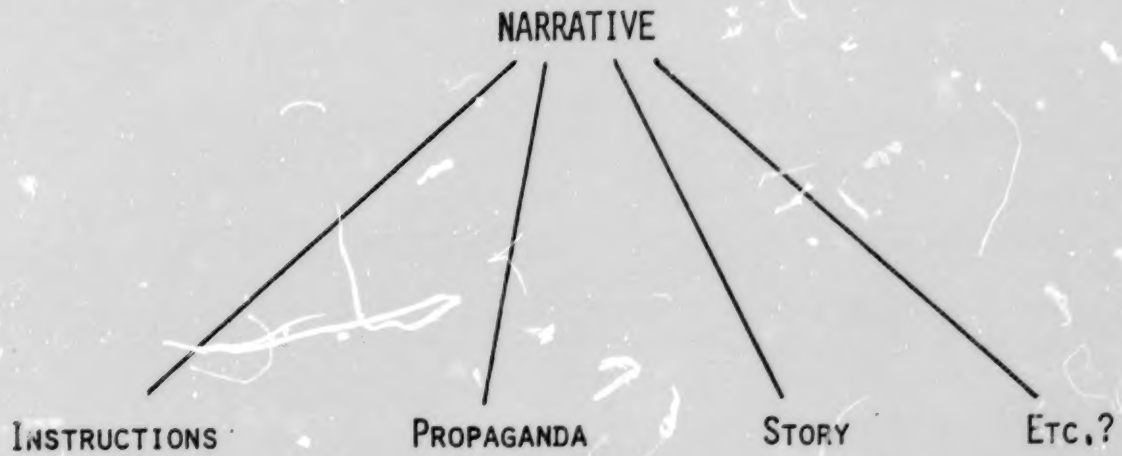


Figure 1. Universal Cognitive Achievements



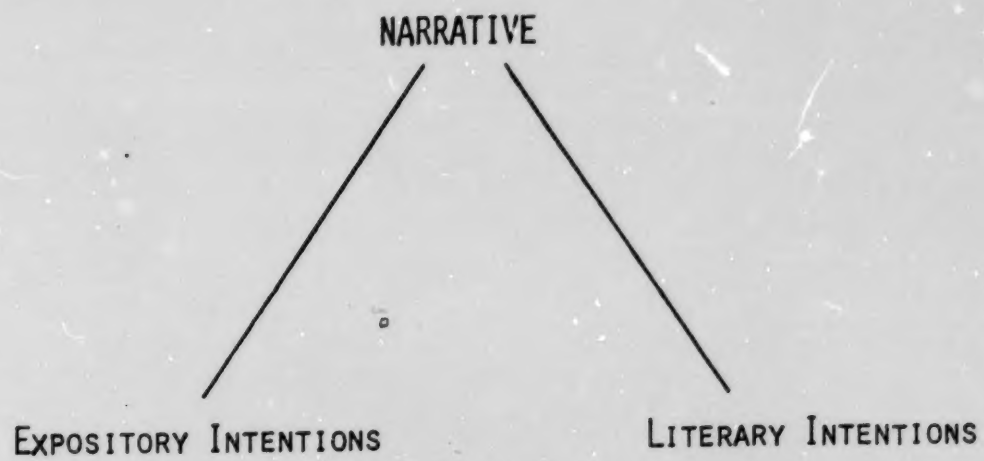


Figure 2. Types of Narrative

PATRICK

Bozo and The Hide 'n' Seek Elephant

M: *They walked among the trees, calling,*
"Where are you, Queenie?" (M reads in a high tone of voice)
But not one of those trees had an elephant
trunk, or elephant ears, or elephant eyes.
"Queenie may be pretending to be a something
else," Bozo said, "But I don't think it's a forest."
See them calling to her? (M points to the picture on page 10.)
Have you ever called out to anything that you lost?

P: (P shakes his head to indicate no.)

M: You never have? How about Peppy? You always used to go outside and call Peppy, your kitty-cat.

P: Un-hum.

M: Remember? You called, "He:re Pepper, Pepper." Is that how you did it?

P: Yeah. (M laughs.) That's ri, he, he wunned away.

M: When she'd run away, that's right. Well Queenie ran away, so they're looking for her. (turns page)

Transcript 1. Patrick and Mother reading *Bozo and the Hide 'n' Seek Elephant*

They walked among the trees, calling, "Where are you, Queenie?"

But not one of those trees had an elephant trunk, or elephant ears, or elephant eyes. "Queenie may be pretending to be a 'something else,'" Bozo said, "but I don't think it's a forest."

Page from *Bozo and the Hide 'n' Seek Elephant.*

December 16, 1983

Cinderella

M: *"Oh, good heavens!" she said. "You can never go in that." she wa:ved her magic wand.* (M sings the following)

"Salago doola,
Menchicka boola,
Bibbidy bobbidy boo," (kisses H twice on top of head)

she said. There stood Cinderella in the loveliest ball dress that ever was and on her feet were (in a 'tiny' voice) *ti:ny glass slippers.*

H: [Chicken,

M: [chicken. (pointing to chicken on p. 11.

H: [Is that a chicken?] Is that a chicken standin' next to the Fairy Godmother?

H: Chicken.

M: (affirming) Chicken. Where's the coach?

H: /wʌt/

M: Where's the coach?

H: (pointing) [/...t/

M: [That's ri:ght.] Now where's the horse?

H: /ʌt/ [/ʌt/] [/ʌt tə/] (pointing)

M: [Where's the horsie?] [Where's the horsie?] There's the hor:se. Now where's Cinderella?

H: /rɛwə/ (Cinderella) (pointing)

M: Is she in a ball gown? And who's this (pointing to Fairy Godmother) Who's this?

H: /dʌdi/? (question intonation)

M: Fairy Godmother. Say Godmother.

H: Godmother. (/gadmʌbər/)

M: Ye:s, Godmother (turning page)

"Oh! cried. Ci...

H: [/vt, ʌt/] (pointing to the coach)

M: Coach. Uh-huh (affirming) *"How can I ever* [*thank you...*]

H: (pointing to castle) [/wʊdɛr] /k æ zi/ (castle)
(slightly rising intonation)

M: That's right, That's the castle. *"Just have a wo:nderful time at the ball, my dear. But remember. This magic lasts only until midnight. At the stroke of midnight the spell* [*will be*] *broken.* [*And e:verything will be...*]

d: [/rɛw ..] [fay ni rɛwə]

fay ni rɛwə (trying to turn to next page because she wanted to get on to Cinderella.)

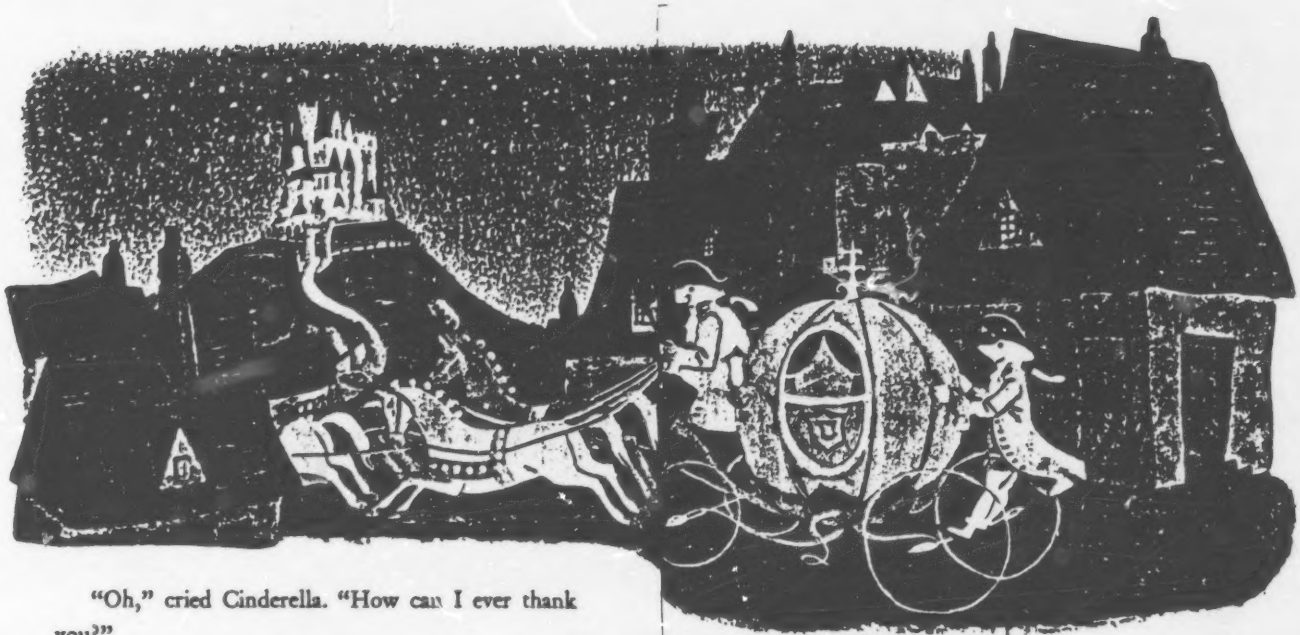
M: Well, wait a minute. Let's g..let's finish reading this page first. *"I'll remember," said Cinderella. "It's more than I ever dreamed of." Then into the magic coach she stepped and was whir:led away to the ball.*

Transcript 2. Hannah and Mother reading *Cinderella.*

"Oh, good heavens," she said. "You can never go in that." She waved her magic wand.

"Salaga doola,
Menchicka boola,
Bibbidy bobbidy boo!" she said.

There stood Cinderella in the loveliest ball dress that ever was. And on her feet were tiny glass slippers!



"Oh," cried Cinderella. "How can I ever thank you?"

"Just have a wonderful time at the ball, my dear," said her fairy godmother. "But remember, this magic lasts only until midnight. At the stroke of midnight, the spell will be broken. And everything will be as it was before."

"I will remember," said Cinderella. "It is more than I ever dreamed of."

Then into the magic coach she stepped, and was whirled away to the ball.

13

Pages from *Cinderella.*

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PATRICK

October 19, 1984

Arthur's Eyes

M: *That day at school Arthur had his glasses in his lunchbox. He told his teacher he'd* (text reads he) *forgot them. But now things were harder to see than ever. When Arthur walked down the hall to the boys' room he had to count the doors* because he couldn't read the sign.

This sign here (pointing to BOYS sign on page) says "Boys." That's where he goes to potty. But he couldn't see because he didn't have his glasses on.

P: Hum.

Transcript 3. Patrick and Mother reading *Arthur's Eyes*.

That day at school, Arthur hid his glasses in his lunchbox. He told his teacher he forgot them.
But now things were harder to see than ever. When Arthur walked down the hall to the boys' room he had to count the doors.
OFFICE
BOYS

Pages from *Arthur's Eyes*.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

HANNAH

February 25, 1984

The Three Little Pigs

M: *The third little pig was barely settled in his new house when the wolf came knocking at the door.*

(in a'sly wolf' voice) *"Little pig, little pig, let me in, let me in," he called.*

(in a little pig voice) *"Not by the hair of my chinny, chin, chin," answered the little pig.*

(wolf voice) *"Then, I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blo-o-o-o-o-ow your house down," said the wolf.*

H: (Giggles)

M: *So the wolf huffed... and he puffed and he huffed and he puffed.*
Ahweeeew! (blowing sound)
Ahweeeew-Ahweeeew!
(turns page)

H: (laughs)

M: *And he huffed and he puffed some more.* Ahweeeew! *But try as he might, he could not blow the brick house down.*
Look how exhausted that poor wolf looks!

Transcript 4. Hannah and Mother reading *The Three Little Pigs*.

-15-

The third little pig was barely settled in his new house when the wolf came knocking at the door.
"Little pig, little pig, let me in, let me in," he called.

"Not by the hair of my chinny, chin, chin," answered the little pig.
"Then I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down," said the wolf.

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So the wolf huffed...

and he puffed...

and he huffed...

and he puffed...

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...and he huffed and puffed some more. But try as he might, he could not blow that brick house down.

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Pages from *The Three Little Pigs*

May 10, 1984

Cinderella

M: *"Oh good heavens," she said. "You can never go in that." She waved her magic wand* (M sings the following)

"Salaga doola,
Lenchicka boola,
Bibbidy bobbidy boo," (kisses H twice on top of head)

she said. There stood Cinderella in the loveliest ball dress that ever was. And on her feet were tiny glass slippers. (turns page)

"Oh," cried Cinderella. "How can I ever thank you?"
"Just have a wonderful time [at the ball, my dear,..."

H: [Where's Cinderella's fairy godmother?]

M: Cinderella is in the coach. And the fairy godmother is way up high watching over her to make sure she has a good time at the ball.

"Just have a wonderful time at the ball, my dear," said her fairy godmother. "But remember..."

H: She's in the house.

M: Yeah, that's a house.

"But remember, this magic lasts only until [midnight."

H: [The fairy godmother is in the, in the house.

M: Is the fairy godmother in the house?

H: [Yeah.

[Oh. Well, that seems like a good place for her, doesn't it?

M: *..At the stroke of midnight, the spell will be broken. And everything will be as it was before.*

H: [Is Cinderella [unintelligible]?

M: Is Cinderella in the coach?
Cinderella's inside the coach.
(two second pause)
All right?

H: She's...she's

M: She's getting what?

H: She's gettin' out of the coach..there

M: Well, she's not gettin' out yet. She'll get out when they get up to the castle up there. (points to picture of castle) See, they get to go up that road right there. (points to road in picture) And they gotta go to the castle where the ball is. And when they get to the castle then Cinderella will get out of the coach.

H: O.K. Will Cinderella [unintelligible] to the ball?

M: Well, she's going in the coach to the ball.

H: [unintelligible] in the house.

M: No, not in the house. She's going in the coach, up that road right there (tracing the curving road in picture with her finger) to the castle. And that's where the...the king's ball is, for the prince.
(two second pause)
O.K.?

H: [unintelligible](tries to turn the page)

M: Well, let's finish reading this page then we'll turn the page, okay?

H: [unintelligible]

M: *"I will remember," said Cinderella." It is more than I ever dreamed of."*

H: We...we're...

M: Huh?

H: We going to the king's ball.

M: Yeah, we're going to the king's ball.
Then into the magic coach she stepped, and was whirled away to the ball.

H: [We go to the king...b[illegible]...]

Transcript 5. Hannah and Mother reading *Cinderella*.